

*Interview with Albert Wendt:
Art, Writing, and the Creative Process*

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Albert Wendt, the famous Samoan novelist and poet, has been in the Citizens' Chair at the English Department of the University of Hawai'i since August 2004, having taken a leave of absence from the University of Auckland where he has taught for the past sixteen years. A few months after Al's arrival, I heard from Reina Whaitiri, his partner and the person he calls "the center of my life now," that he was spending most of his free time drawing and painting. She said that the creative muse had taken hold of Al and that he couldn't stop. Their apartment, she said, had evidence of the artist at work on the floor, on the dining table, on the walls, everywhere! Over subsequent months, I continued to make inquiries about Al's progress and kept hoping that he would soon invite me to see his art. Finally the invitation came: "What are you doing?" he said over the phone. "Would you and Jeannette like to come for morning tea and have a look at the art?" "When?" I asked. "What about ten o'clock today?"

On Sunday, 25 April 2005, the day of the phone call, Al and Reina were at the door of their two-bedroom apartment in Mānoa Valley, Honolulu, to welcome me and my wife. Al was wearing a brown floral lavalava and yellow T-shirt and looking very relaxed. Reina was her usual warm and friendly self, ushering us inside after a hug and a kiss. Immediately we felt as though we had entered an art gallery. Reina was right—the art had taken over the apartment! More interested in feasting on the art that was watching us from the walls than partaking of the morning tea, we rushed from one painting to another like little children in a toyshop. Our eyes flitted across the room as we tried to see everything at once, as though we feared something might disappear before we had a chance to see it all. Al had outdone himself: the nine canvases he had produced while in Hawai'i

(what he calls his Ko'olau and Pele series) adorned the walls, and stacked on the floor around the sitting room were framed drawings and paintings he had done in New Zealand. I knew immediately that, no matter how busy we all were, I wanted to interview Al and feature his art in this journal so that others could share the thrill of that Sunday morning. Most of our readers will be unaware that in recent years, the Pacific's best-known poet and novelist has been channeling his energy and talents into drawing and painting. I hope the interview that follows and the art that graces the cover of this journal and is interspersed throughout the text will make Al's art better known to his many students, readers, and admirers.

The interview took place on 1 May 2005, at five o'clock on a Saturday afternoon, inside Al and Reina's apartment in Mānoa Valley. Al, Reina, and I were seated around the same dining table over coffee, tea, and biscuits. While Reina drank her coffee and marked her students' assignments, I asked Al about his recent trip to Kaua'i to read from his work. I also learned that on that day he had performed at a literature festival on campus, even though he should have been resting because he was coming down with a bad cold.

The artworks I had seen during my first visit were still up, and the apartment remained warm and cozy. I felt enveloped and protected by the power and mana of Pele and the Ko'olau mountains keeping watch from the walls of the living room. Searching for an appropriate entry into the interview, I started from the beginning.

VH: How long have you been interested in art?

AW: I did a lot of art when I was young. And then when I went to teachers' training college I specialized in art and the teaching of it; when I went to university I continued for a while but then the writing took over. I didn't make art for thirty years or more, but I continued to follow what was happening in the art scene in the Pacific. Then when I left Fiji and went back to New Zealand in 1988, I became part of the strong art movement among a young generation of Pacific Islanders and Māori. A strange thing happened—I found myself learning about art from that younger generation, and of course, from the elder Polynesian generation of artists.

VH: Who are some of these artists?

AW: Artists such as Ralph Hotere, Selwyn Muru, Cliff Whiting, and Para Machitt. I also began to learn from Pacific Islands artists such as Fatu Feu‘u and Michael Tuffery. Most of these Pacific Islander artists are New Zealand born. I also like the work of some Pākehā artists.

VH: How would you describe the work of contemporary Pacific artists?

AW: The work is rooted in the culture the artist is from, but in a very individualistic manner. Some are quite political, not necessarily overt. They are redefining who we are, also showing where the art of our countries may be going.

VH: So when did you actually start producing art again?

AW: In 2000, when I couldn’t resist the overwhelming urge to do art again—but I didn’t tell anyone, not even Reina.

VH: Why didn’t you?

AW: Because I wanted to see if I could do it again before I told anyone. Reina bought me some art material but she didn’t know I had already started. I had bought materials from the French Art Shop near my house in Ponsonby [New Zealand]. When I went there I was surprised at what I saw being used as art materials. You see, I had been away from it for over thirty years. So I bought some basic art materials—pencils, pens, inks, paper, pastels—that cost me nearly four hundred dollars. I told them that they were for my granddaughter. I went home and started learning to draw again.

VH: Were you looking at and learning from books?

AW: No, I wanted to learn through the practice. I drew and drew; then I moved from pencils to pen and ink, to different colored pens, to using pastels. I ran out of materials, so I went back to the art shop again and asked to be shown some of the other materials. I bought five hundred dollars worth. The shop assistant asked me again who the materials were for and I finally admitted that some of the materials were for me and that I was learning. I went home and started using the metallic pens. At that time I

was doing the drawings for my book, *The Book of the Black Star*. I did about 102 pen and ink drawings for that. We selected 52 for the book.

VH: That was a lot. What did you do next?

AW: At Christmas that year I thought it would be a good surprise for Reina and my family to have my first art exhibition in my home. I didn't allow anyone into my house for three and a half months! I got the art framed and then I took down other people's art that I had on the walls of my house and put up thirty-two of my own pieces. I invited all my children, grandchildren, and Reina's and my closest friends. I didn't tell them why they were invited.

VH: I guess they all came?

AW: They did. I had prepared a page with the titles of all the drawings that were now hanging on the walls of my house. Also, I had done a series of drawings of the rainbow for each invited person, as a gift. When they arrived I welcomed them all on the back veranda to my house. Then I opened the back door—my grandchildren ran into the house, looked around, and wanted to know where the actors were. They thought I had been secretly rehearsing a play. I told them to go back in again and look at the walls. They did and returned and asked whose art was on the walls. I told them they were mine and that I had been working on them for over three months. Then I presented them with their gifts of the rainbow drawings. Everyone there got a drawing.

VH: Did you ever think about selling your work?

AW: Some of the people who came wanted to buy them. I was surprised. My daughter Sina said I should sell some of them to pay for the framing. Later she put the prices on the family Web site. Soon after that we had a one-day exhibition so the public could come in. I sold a lot of the work and gave some away to my family and friends. I paid for the framing and made some profit. That was how I was able to contribute financially to your film *The Land Has Eyes*. Since then I haven't looked back. Then *The Book of the Black Star* was published. Now art is a very vital part of my life.

VH: Have you noticed any patterns, themes for example, that run through your artwork?

AW: My early drawings and paintings were efforts in how to use the materials. I was fascinated with the possibilities.

VH: Did you wish you hadn't stopped making art for so long?

AW: No. I don't regret not practicing art for thirty years. Through my writing I was able to work out my philosophical views of the world, and so when I resumed my art, I knew what I wanted to transfer to my artwork.

VH: In a nutshell, how would you describe your art?

AW: Most are poems, done in pictures.

VH: What comes first?

AW: Sometimes it's the poems, the words. I've found that if I take already published poems, things don't work as well. If I intentionally sit down and work out a poem on the spot it goes better with the drawing. Maybe this is because I'm more interested in the materials and how to use them.

VH: Are there certain things you avoid doing in your art?

AW: Yes, I deliberately avoid what has become associated with Pacific art, images such as frangipani, tattoo patterns, or weaving patterns, for example. I want to develop my own style, like any other artist.

VH: Your own voice as a storyteller, except now it's a different medium?

AW: Yes, this time it's using form and color, to explore the pōuliuli, the darkness. I love black. But I think the way I use black is not threatening, but elegant and fertile.

VH: What would you say is one advantage of practicing art late in life?

AW: I don't have to worry about having enough money to buy the materials. (Laughs)

VH: So money is not a constraint?

AW: No, maybe when I retire money will be a problem. If I depended on art for my living it would be different, also. But I don't have to.

VH: Do you get this same kind of satisfaction when you're writing?

AW: Because it's new, the intensity is enormous, like when I first started writing in my 20s and early 30s. I can spend days and not care what is happening to the rest of the world!

VH: Do you feel that you have all these ideas inside you that have to come out?

AW: When I'm in the zone, as it were, it is almost total. I'm in a high. I love taking the paint, applying it to the canvas, and actually seeing the color, the shape of it. I prefer abstract or semiabstract art. I'm not interested in representational art. And I also feel I don't have all that long to do this; I'm now in my 60s so I have ten more years. For me, art is another form of writing.

VH: How has your move to Hawai'i affected your interest in art?

AW: Here in Hawai'i I've started to paint on canvas. I've painted nine so far. Hawai'i is ideal for art because it's warm here, and the quality of the light is fantastic. Also, here in Hawai'i I don't have to do much teaching or administration. Living in this valley and looking at the Ko'olau mountains everyday from my house has been very inspirational for me, creatively. The first five canvases I have ever done in my life are the Ko'olau series. Before painting the Ko'olau, I did lots of sketches of the mountains; I also wrote a long poem about them. If I have an exhibition I'm going to include the poem.

VH: Can I publish it with this interview?

AW: Yes, you have my permission.

The Ko'olau

(1)

Since we moved into Mānoa I've not wanted to escape
 the Ko'olau at the head of the valley
 They rise as high as atua as profound as their bodies
 They've been here since Pele fished these fecund islands
 out of Her fire and gifted them the songs
 of birth and lamentation

Every day I stand on our front veranda
 and on acid free paper try and catch their constant changing
 as the sun tattoos its face across their backs

Some mornings they turn into tongue-
 less mist my pencil can't voice or map
 Some afternoons they swallow the dark rain
 and dare me to record that on the page

What happens to them on a still and cloudless day?
 Will I be able to sight Pele Who made them?
 If I reach up into the sky's head will I be able
 to pull out the Ko'olau's incendiary genealogy?

At night when I'm not alert they grow long limbs
 and crawl down the slopes of my dreams and out
 over the front veranda to the frightened stars

Yesterday Noel our neighbour's nine-
 year-old son came for the third day
 and watched me drawing the Ko'olau
 Don't you get bored doing *that*? he asked
 Not if your life depended on it! I replied
 And realized I meant it

(2)

There are other mountains in my life:
 Vaea who turned to weeping stone as he waited
 for his beloved Apaula to return and who now props
 up the fading legend of Stevenson to his "wide and starry sky"
 and reality-TV tourists hunting for treasure islands

Mauga-o-Fetu near the Fafa at Tufutafoe
 at the end of the world where meticulous priests gathered

to unravel sunsets and the flights of stars that determine
our paths to Puloa or into the unexplored
geography of the agaga

Taranaki Who witnessed Te Whiti's fearless stand at Parihaka
against the settlers' avaricious laws and guns
Who watched them being evicted and driven eventually
from their succulent lands but not from the defiant struggle
their descendants continue today forever until victory

(3)

The Ko'olau watched the first people settle in the valley
The Kānaka Maoli planted their ancestor the Kalo
in the mud of the stream and swamps
and later in the terraced lo'i they constructed
Their ancestor fed on the valley's black blood
They fed on the ancestor
and flourished for generations

Recently their heiau on the western slopes was restored
The restorers tried to trace the people's descendants in the valley
They found none to bless the heiau's re-opening
On a Saturday morning as immaculate as Pele's mana
we stood in the heiau in their welcoming presence that stretched
across the valley and up into their mountains
where their kapa-wrapped bones are hidden

(4)

The Ko'olau has seen it all
I too will go eventually
with my mountains wrapped up
in acid free drawings that sing
of these glorious mountains
and the first Kānaka Maoli who named
and loved them forever

(Albert Wendt, Mānoa, December 2004–January 2005)

VH: Did the poem come before the sketches or vice versa?

AW: I did pencil-and-ink drawings before I worked on the canvases, then
I continued to work on the canvases as I was revising the poem.

VH: What gives you more pleasure, your creative writing or the art?

AW: At the moment it's the art, because of this renewed interest. I'm just five years old, as an artist!

VH: What is it about the art that appeals to you?

AW: I love color. In writing you describe in words, but color you can actually see. I love the feel of the paint—and watching it spread across a canvas, I get a lot of pleasure out of that. Now I understand why kids like to dip their hands in paint. I get a lot of pleasure too when Reina and my family like what I've done.

VH: How did you discover your style of art?

AW: I discovered it while I was doing it. You develop it as you're working on it. I learned from my writing that you don't have to write about new things. It could be different ways of doing or looking at the same thing. I do the same in the art, different ways of using black or red.

VH: Tell me about the Pele series, and how it all started.

AW: I love Haunani-Kay Trask's poem "Night in a Sharkskin Drum," and so when I started painting in Hawai'i, I wanted to pay tribute to the akua and forces here. So I reread Haunani's poem and I took the last verse and chorus and put that on the first canvas: "From Halema'uma'u our fiery Akua comes: E, Pele e, E, Pele e, E, Pele e." I found that "E, Pele e" is used in many Hawaiian songs and chants to greet Pele. I put the "E, Pele e" and "Halema'uma'u" in three other paintings. While painting them I walked around the house trying to chant "E, Pele e" in different ways. I think that when you actually see the volcano and how massive it is, you actually can hear the greeting "E, Pele e" echoing across the crater. I'm sure that's why Haunani's poem repeats it three times. And of course the basic colors are black, the color of lava, and red, the color of molten lava and blood. In the Pele series I use the color red as if it's blood, which is basically what it is. Molten lava is molten earth. Our words for blood in Samoan are toto, eleele for earth, and palapala for mud. When someone is bleeding, we use eleele and palapala, as if the person is bleeding earth. Thus every time I see molten lava I see blood, and I try to use this idea in the Pele series.

VH: Artists have been painting volcanoes for a long time. How is your art different?

AW: I didn't want it to look like the typical pictures of a volcano. My paintings are quite abstract but people will recognize what they are about. And this greeting, the phrase "E, Pele e," is short but very long. It also feels very old; I can see the priests chanting it across the crater. It adequately conveys the power of Pele. What else is there to say that will better capture her power? I'm fascinated by how this straightforward, simple greeting has such a huge resonance, and I marvel at this Hawaiian way of expressing Pele's power and mana.

VH: Do you vocalize while you're painting as you do in your writing?

AW: I think Reina got fed up with me walking around the house and chanting it in different ways! Finally when I was working on the nine canvasses I was so obsessed with the work that Reina had to tell me to stop. I was physically a wreck!

VH: You must feel exhausted after a good day's work.

AW: It's like writing my novels, except now I'm visually seeing it happen, and moving from language to color and form. It's a different language but the same process. If I was finding that I didn't have it, that I wasn't succeeding in handling the material, I'd give it up, but so far it seems to be working. It also helps to see the art by other artists.

VH: What do you think of most of the art you see in Hawai'i?

AW: Much of it is clichéd and stereotypical: white sand beaches and blue seas and idyllic landscapes and hula dancers, for example. I'm sure you've seen it. When you go to the art shops you see all these romantic paintings; I'm told that's the art that sells. It's very tough not to be influenced by the marketplace. I'm very fortunate. If I had to depend on my art for a living it'd be very difficult, so maybe I'd have to do art that sells, but then you never know, maybe the art you're doing will sell, if not now, maybe later, like Ralph Hotere's art. Now, most people can't afford to buy a Hotere painting. I'm also inspired and influenced by the mana-ful art being done

by Kanaka Maoli artists such as Imaikalani Kalahale, the art that truly reflects the terrible colonial history of Hawai‘i and the frightening unjust treatment the Kānaka Maoli continue to suffer, the art that shows the renaissance in Kanaka Maoli culture and life, and their refusal to be erased.

VH: Where do you see your art heading in the future?

AW: The art is going to take me wherever it’s going to take me, just like my writing does. Right now I’m really enjoying it. Yeah, I’m flying!